



## LECTURE

# Beauty and the beast

The fearful symmetry of the jaguar  
and other natural beings in Kayapo ritual  
and myth

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This paper describes the notion of “beauty” as a socially constructed value among the Kayapo of the Brazilian Amazon and how this value reflects relations within society and between humans and animals. Kayapo society is divided into two status groups, people who have received beautiful names from certain kin during elaborate village rituals, and those who have not. The ritual bestowal of such names counteracts fissive tendencies produced through the developmental cycle of Kayapo households. “Beautiful people” tend to have wider kin networks with access to greater resources and leadership roles than do ordinary “commoners.” These distinctions are correlated with categories of animals and forms of behavior, and reveal parallels to the socialization and death of the person. However, certain contradictions in Kayapo society are epitomized in the figure of the jaguar, an animal that embodies beauty and power as well as fierceness and bestiality. Similarly, leaders mobilize resources for the well-being of the entire community, but they are also at risk of reverting to bestial behavior and running amok. Anthropological theories of animism and perspectivism would do well to consider the more nuanced Kayapo concepts of the complex interconnections between animals and humans, the natural and the social.

Keywords: beauty, leadership, human/animal relations, ritual, socialization, death

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## Introduction

As an aging anthropologist, I have found that one of the more congenial ideas of the Mebengokre Kayapo, the indigenous people with whom I have been doing research since the 1960s, is that, as people grow older, they tend to become more beautiful. The Kayapo terms I translate here as “beauty,” *mêtch*, or in its more enthusiastically



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approbatory forms, *mékumren* and *mêtire*, connote aesthetic beauty, perfection of performance, or finesse of execution in such valued modes of public performance as oratory, singing, and dancing, admirable qualities of character, and the satisfactoriness of social relations and transactions. These valued cultural qualities constitute the most desirable aspects of social identity, a cultural ideal of humanity that is attainable to varying degrees by all social persons and things, but is generally expected to be exemplified in the highest degree by senior men and women who have attained communal prominence as leaders and “teachers.” Such leadership is manifested through public oratory in communal political and ceremonial activities, especially those associated with the possession and circulation of ritually prestigious “beautiful” names and “valuables” (items of personal adornment and rights to perform specific acts in communal ceremonies). They may be distinguished as such from “common” (*kakrit*) persons, who lack such prestigious social attributes or qualities. There is a parallel but less formally constituted classification of food animals: “beautiful” people should on the whole only eat “beautiful” animals, birds, or fish, while “common” or undistinguished folk may be pejoratively referred to as *mē ngwòy tam bôrô*, “those who eat birds thrown directly on the fire without removing the feathers” (i.e., without skinning or cleaning them, resembling the way animals would eat prey).

The ideal of beauty, as reflected in socially refined and distinctive behavior, is thus bound up with ideas about the relation of humans and animals, or humanity and animality as existential conditions. Humans and animals are not conceived as either entirely different or originally identical kinds of beings, but, rather, as comprising differential points on a continuous scale of relative distinction and refinement (i.e., “beauty”) of qualities of identity and conduct. The Kayapo consider humans, animals, and, to varying degrees, other nonhuman beings as sharing fundamental aspects of existence, such as processes of growth, health, energy, strength, proneness to rage and violence or to tameness and affability, and as experiencing the processes of sickness, aging, and death. In the cases of some animal, fish, and bird species, they also practice such cultural and social traits as having names, ceremonies, language-like communication, and elementary family life. However, in no cases are these features and activities fully identical with their Kayapo human analogs. For example, it is believed that fish or animals may hold ceremonies, but they have only a single form that is fixed for the whole species, like the physical forms of the creatures in question; furthermore, the performers move or dance about in circles repeating the names of their own species, rather than bestowing their individual names on younger-generation kin of specific relationship categories, which humans do.

This implies that the distinction between humanity and animality is not conceived simply as an external difference between humans and animal species, but as levels or qualities of being, which are shared to varying degrees by different species: humans share aspects of animality, but humans alone share certain unique features that set humanity apart from animals. These distinctive features themselves, however, comprise developments or elaborations of prototypes originally shared by the ancestors of contemporary animal and human beings. The distinction between humanity and animality, in sum, is internal to humans as a relation between levels of being human, as well as external in the relations between human

and animal species. Moreover, the distinction is not a fixed and stable boundary as an internal component of specifically human existence; rather, it is a fluctuating and variable process of transformation of basic animal powers into human cultural forms—a process that can run in either direction. In this process, animality functions as the boundary condition of humanity; in the Kayapo perspective, we begin and end as animals. The development and ultimate dissolution of human personhood is grounded in, and interdependent with, transformations of human bodiliness, which involve the containment and control, channeling, and appropriation of animal energies and forms that are fundamental parts of human existence through the processes of socialization and enculturation. The social development of the person is treated in Kayapo ritual and social practice as a process consisting of repetitive transformations of internal bodily energies and affective dispositions as well as external social relations. These transformations take the form of framing and regulating spontaneous affects and energies within consciously objectified forms of socially valued behavior. The Kayapo consider these spontaneous affects and energies to be shared to varying degrees by all living beings and some entities that we would consider inanimate. The transformation of these essentially animal features into social forms of human bodiliness, personality, and behavior is achieved through participation in social relations in the family and through public activities, notably rites of passage. They are accompanied by changes in bodily adornment and recruitment to membership in communal groups such as age sets. The animal aspects of human existence, however, are not limited to bodily needs and drives, but are also imbued in elementary social relations, such as close family relations between parents and children, and between adults of different genders in their roles as mates and subsistence providers. These relations are the locus of physical reproduction and primary socialization, and as such are the context for transforming the affective dispositions involved in intimate, precultural relations in socially coordinated, culturally valued forms of relationship and behavior. Myths such as the Kayapo myth of the jaguar's fire record the affective and social terrors and adjustments of such attachments, as well as the social and cultural stakes involved in such crises of reframing and transforming personal identity and social relations. While the Kayapo regard themselves and their fundamental social relationships (such as the elementary family) as sharing some traits with animals and certain other nonhuman entities, however, they do not represent humans and animals as essentially identical in either subjective or objective terms. On the contrary, human personhood, bodiliness, and social relations are conceived as different in critical respects from their animal counterparts and prototypes, despite the extent to which humans may share, or may once have shared, some of their forms.

The essential distinction between contemporary humans and animals, as represented in myths, ritual practices, and various culturally framed attributes of social identity, amount to a distinctive Kayapo conception of the essence of humanity. The fundamental aspect of this distinction is the human development of objectified formulas (frames) of feeling and activity, and the ability to communicate and inculcate these frames through symbolic communication. The struggle to internalize and put into practice these objectified patterns of personal behavior and social activity is the focus of the traumas and triumphs of individual socialization and



social regulation of activity. In Kayapo terms, this is the essence of the struggle to achieve “beauty,” the proper integration of personal identity and social relations.

As I developed my ethnographic understanding of the Kayapo ideal of “beauty,” however, I became aware of a troubling ambivalence pervading Kayapo attitudes toward the notion of beauty as a social ideal. This ambivalence is expressed in a sense of the inherent instability and susceptibility to a dizzying collapse of even relatively well-integrated, highly valued, and beautifully framed specimens of social identity into its antisocial opposite: raging, chaotic, and even murderous rampages. I found that this culturally recognized form of berserk, antisocial madness, called in Kayapo *aybanh*, is associated with jaguars. It is thought to be caused by the penetration of the skin by the hairs or blood of jaguars, as when a hunter has contact with the body of a jaguar he has killed or brings its body into a village, to be roasted and eaten by boys of the junior age set. The hairs or blood of other wild animals or even human enemies may also give rise to the antisocial madness, *aybanh*, but the jaguar is thought to be the most potent etiological agent in this regard. A person who becomes *aybanh* loses partial control of his or her bodily movements and becomes functionally blind, or at least incapable of visually coordinating bodily movements in a normal way; the eyes tend to roll up so that only the whites show (the Kayapo expression for a person who has become *aybanh* is *no kaykep*, “eyes roll around”). The *aybanh* person becomes violently, even murderously aggressive toward everyone without regard to identity, gender, or social relationship. His or her body becomes extremely hot to the touch, sweat pours off the skin, and the muscles become powerfully tensed. As I was to discover from personal experience, persons in this trance-like state become extremely strong. The qualities of the *aybanh* condition, ranging from extreme body heat (internalized fire?) to fierce aggressiveness to the loss of cultural faculties like language and motor coordination, can be understood as the assumption of a jaguar-like identity and the accompanying loss of social characteristics. As I learned about the condition from informants, I was intrigued by its affinities to jaguars and above all by the insistence that the most “beautiful” or culturally refined people seemed particularly vulnerable to sudden onsets of the jaguar-like state. In their accounts, it seemed that the very elaboration of perfected forms of social discipline and cultural behavior, which are intended to guard against relapses into unsocialized, animalistic behavior, might actually be responsible for generating counterpressures for brushing aside social restraints and giving expression to the notionally repressed modes of behavior. In other words, the social production of beauty gives rise to an intimation of a fearful symmetry of beauty and bestiality.

This sense, I realized, is bound up with a Kayapo notion that their constructions of social identity as transformations of bodilyness and affect in the service of idealized patterns of socially valued feeling and relationship conduct might give way and fail to hold in check the powerful propensity to identify with the violently antisocial modes of feeling and action exemplified by the jaguar. This social collapse renders them vulnerable to relapses into the bestiality that continues to lurk beneath the veneer of their sociality. The most insidious form of this Kayapo idea is the feeling that that this danger may be aggravated, rather than repressed, by the adoption of ideal (“beautiful”) forms of social feeling—even though such forms are intended to control and protect against tendencies emanating from contacts with

external exemplars of the animal substratum of bodiliness and affect, above all, the jaguar, or with internal tensions arising from its transformations into cultural forms. The most “beautiful” people may be the most vulnerable to a tendency for human social refinement to collapse into its opposite: violent fits of antisocial aggression and a loss of cultural consciousness, even language, more appropriate to beasts of prey than to social humans.

### Insights from extreme anthropology

My first ethnographic intimation of this problem came to me early in my fieldwork in an unexpected sudden and frightening form.

In late 1965, I presented my doctoral thesis based on a year and a half of fieldwork among the Kayapo and immediately returned to Brazil to begin a second bout of fieldwork with a different Kayapo group than the two I had previously studied. This was the Mentuktire Kayapo community of Porori, located on the bank of the Xingu River. After I had been in Porori for a couple of months, an epidemic of flu broke out, and six people out of the village population of 168 died. My wife had returned to Rio, and I was the only person capable to dispense a semblance of Western medical care, which, in that context, meant essentially aspirin pills and heavy doses of bedside manner. I soon found myself spending most of my waking hours trying to help the many sick and terrified Indians, doing rudimentary nursing, and even helping to bury a few of those who died, whose kin were too sick to do the job.

One afternoon I spent several hours with a very sick widow who lived by herself in a house built some distance from the village. I returned to the circle of houses when the sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows on the cleared ground of the central plaza. It was oddly quiet—none of the usual noises of household conversations, playing children, or women chopping wood for cooking fires. I caught sight of one person, a senior man I knew and with whom I had friendly relations. He was a leader in political activities, but known for eccentric public behavior. At this moment, he was standing in the center of the plaza with his back to me. He seemed to be holding a shotgun, with the breech broken open in the loading position, the barrel and wooden stock protruding from different sides of his body. A little odd, but I thought nothing of it. My hut lay ahead on the opposite side of the plaza, so my way led directly past him. As I passed him, I clapped him on the shoulder and hailed him cheerfully by name, “Ho, Krantàytch! What are you up to?”

Several things then happened in rapid succession. Krantàytch, who had not seen me coming, jerked his body around and turned his face to me. With a shock, I saw that his eyes were turned up into his head so that only the whites were showing. He was trembling with intense muscle tension and was extremely hot to the touch. As I registered these disconcerting facts, Krantàytch succeeded in pushing a cartridge into the firing chamber of the shotgun and closed the barrel with a loud click. He spoke not a word, and seemed to be in a trance. With a start of fear, I registered the significance of the odd silence that enveloped the usually noisy village: the place was abandoned except for Krantàytch and me. I guessed at once that he had entered the crazed, antisocial trance state the Kayapo call *aybahn*, and that the reason the village was so quiet was that all the inhabitants had fled for their lives to the forest.



I was alone with a crazed berserk, with my arm around his shoulder as he loaded a shotgun with trembling hands.

I said, "Krantàytch, give me the gun," and seized the barrel. In his trance, however, he seemed unable either to understand or to speak. He was trembling violently and his tautly stretched muscles were as hard and strong as steel. I could not wrench the gun from his hands, but I was able to cover the trigger guard and keep him from taking it away from me so he might have pointed it and pulled the trigger. I dared not let go, thinking that if I turned to run away I would likely get a load of buckshot in my back at point-blank range. As we struggled, each of us using all of our strength but neither able to get control of the shotgun from the other, I had a vision of the painting by Henri Rousseau of a tropical forest scene of gigantic trees standing motionless in golden afternoon sunlight (one feels a stillness in it as total as the setting where we were grappling), in one corner of which are the diminutive figures of a man and a panther or jaguar locked in a death struggle, which does not disturb the indifferent calm of the forest.

Fortunately, the silent village proved not to be as serenely empty and unconcerned with human difficulties as Rousseau's jungle. From one of the houses encircling the plaza suddenly burst three men—the old chief Kremoro, another senior man, and a young man of the bachelor's age set. They had been hiding in the hut and watching for a chance to rush Krantàytch and take away his gun. I had unexpectedly given them their chance. They ran out and tackled Krantàytch, and the four of us succeeded in wresting the gun from his grasp. We extracted the cartridge and ran with the gun and cartridge back to the hiding place in the hut where the men had been lurking. Krantàytch meanwhile staggered awkwardly away until he reached a house on the periphery of the plaza. He entered it and seized a number of pieces of wood that were smoldering on a hearth. He returned with them to his former place in the middle of the plaza and began throwing them, apparently at random and without aiming, in the general direction of the thatched houses on the periphery of the plaza. He did not hit any houses or succeed in setting any of them on fire, which I supposed was his intention. Our little group stood ready to try to put out any fires he might start, but none of us made any move to restrain him or forcibly prevent more of his crazed behavior.

As we watched from our hiding place in the house, I noticed that the young man standing beside me had begun to tremble violently over his whole body. Startled, and fearing that he too might be slipping into a berserk trance like that of Krantàytch, I cried out, "Oh no! Not you too! Is everybody going *aybankh* around here?" To this he indignantly replied, "What? Am I a beautiful (*mêetch*) person that I should go *aybankh* and run wild (*âkrê*) like an animal? Not me! I'm just a common (*kakrit*) guy!"

My young companion turned out merely to be shivering from fright after his encounter with Krantàytch and the onset of the evening chill. Meanwhile, when Krantàytch ran out of things to throw, he began to show signs of exhaustion. He hung his head, became inactive, and finally fell to the ground. Seeing this, Kremoro, the old chief, shouted from our hiding place for people to come out of the woods, that it was safe now that Krantàytch's trance seemed to be ending. He sent the first to arrive with buckets and pans to the river to bring water to pour on the prostrate Krantàytch, who was apparently unconscious but still hot to the touch. Soon he was

lying in the middle of a large mud puddle, which effectively cooled him down to normal temperature. He thereupon regained consciousness, although he seemed a bit dazed and had no memory of his lapse into trance. He was not held responsible for his threatening behavior, which was accepted as conduct to be expected from Krantàytc and, in general, from one emerging from an *aybanh* trance, the sort of behavior to be expected from certain “beautiful” or prominent citizens like chiefs or holders of honorific ceremonial names.

From my conversation with my trembling companion, I learned some invaluable lessons about Kayapo ideas of sociality, animality, beauty, and the causes of psychic breakdowns into the antisocial trances. I had thought of the Kayapo value of *mêtc*, which I have translated as “beauty,” as the epitome of sociality, and, as such, the opposite of *kakrit*, vulgar commonness, and above all berserk craziness as exemplified by *aybanh*. I now realized that common sociality was not even on the same scale as *aybanh* trance; the appropriate contrast was rather that between humanity, in the Kayapo sense of social form, versus animality, in their sense of the animal substratum of human bodilyness.

In *aybanh* trance, I learned, the socialized part of human subjective identity becomes eclipsed, leaving only the unsocialized, unencultured part. Those undergoing *aybanh* trance lose all or virtually all of their cultural skills, including language and basic locomotion, and ultimately lapse into unconsciousness, from which they may not recover. This state has much in common with shamanic trance, except that, for Kayapo shamans, the coma comes first, then giving way to the trance in which the shaman voluntarily assumes the form of the first creature he sees (usually a flying creature like a moth, bat, or bird). He may go on to assume other nonhuman forms, but he must always remain conscious of his humanity and never lose himself completely in the nonhuman form he has taken on. If he does make the fatal mistake of accepting his adopted form as his real identity, he loses contact with his own body, with the result that both his spirit and his body die. Neither spirit form nor body content can survive without the other: life, in other words, consists of a constant interaction and interdependence between the two.

*Aybanh* trance, like shamanic trance, involves the separation of the spiritual form of a person—what the Kayapo call the *karon*, his or her socialized and enculturated subjectivity, attached to his or her outward bodily form—from the physical content of his or her body. In most cases, this separation is incomplete, as in sleep or a coma, but in particularly intense or violent cases, the connection between the body and its loosely attached spirit form may be lost, resulting in death. The loosening of the relation of *karon* spirit form to body (~*in*, flesh, and ~*i*, bones) regularly accompanies processes of transformation from one identity to another, as in initiation rituals effecting passages from adolescence to adulthood, or the ultimate transition into death. In such passages, the previously existing physical and social identity of a person is suppressed or separated, following which the initiand is brought into contact with transformative powers and processes that have the power to disrupt or disintegrate ordinary social identities and to form new and different ones. Such transformative powers are the essence of the sacred, as conceived by Robertson Smith, consisting of things needing to be kept apart from ordinary profane or secular social life. Kayapo male initiands, for example, are obliged to live in camps in the forest apart from the rest of society. Their spirits are thought



to be so loosely attached to their bodies that loud noises might cause them to fly away, causing the boys to die. On the other hand, the boys take on the character of violent monsters who might rape or kill any woman who stumbles upon their camp. The initiands, in short, have some of the properties of those in an *aybanh* trance. Neither initiands, if they abuse someone who has come too near their seclusion camp, nor people in an *aybanh* trance are held morally accountable for their deeds, since they are not regarded as having been themselves when they did them. Krantàytch, after his cooling off in the puddle, claimed he had no memory of what had happened; he was taken at his word and treated indulgently like a drunk with a bad hangover.

In summary, *aybanh* trance, like the transformative processes and inversions in the medial phases of social rites of passage, is about the power to escape from and transform the identities, relations, and mores of ordinary social life. Persons who become *aybanh* are thought to have accessed such power and thus to have become suspended above ordinary social life and relations, but without the constraints and social safeguards that insulate society from direct contact with them in normal rites of passage. With their normal social identities and morals stripped away, they tend to oscillate between polar extremes of transcendental exaltation beyond the range of secular social existence and the infrasocial animality that is all that remains of their normal subjective identities. This helps to understand why some persons who yearn for more power and importance than is their lot in normal social life—yearnings that cannot be satisfied by conventional tokens of status or “beauty” like beautiful names or “valuables”—tend to develop a vocation for going *aybanh*. At the very least, it is an infallible way of commanding attention, concern, and fear from others as a powerful and dangerous person. The performance of outrageous or threatening acts by persons ostensibly in trance is normally not held against them as it would be if done by a normal person, because the pattern of asocial or anti-social behavior by persons in transcendental or liminal states is well established in the culture. It seems to me, however, that in some cases, at least, such acts may be deliberately undertaken for the purpose of impressing others in this way. It seemed to me that Krantàytch was such a person. He was known for past episodes of trance behavior in which he would stand in the plaza and declaim nonsensical phrases such as “*ikrê kam ngô!*”, which literally means, “water in my body cavity,” perhaps intimating that he was heating up as the result of *aybanh* tendencies and was in need of cooling. In any case, after emerging from his trance and lapsing into unconsciousness, his behavior returned to normal. I did not hear of further outbursts of violence by him such as I had witnessed, but I saw that people regarded him as a relatively wild and potentially dangerous character. I took this as an indication that his trances had perhaps had the desired effect.

Instances of *aybanh* trance behavior help to bring into focus the importance of Kayapo notions of spirit as the animating form of the body, and of the physical corporality of the body and its spirit form as distinct, but interdependent, factors in the development of human bodiliness and social personhood. These notions are also fundamental to Kayapo ideas about the character not only of humans but also of animals and other beings. These ideas need to be understood, however, in the context of a closer examination of Kayapo social relations—in particular, the relations of the production of “beauty” as a social value.

## Distinction, tension, and beauty in Kayapo social life

The Kayapo, like the other Northern Gê peoples, live in large villages consisting of numerous extended-family households built around the periphery of a large, open central plaza. These domestic households conform to a standard pattern of post-marital residence: men are expected to move into the households of the women they marry. Women, by contrast, reside for their whole lives in the households of their mothers and fathers, into which they were born. Their husbands must thus take up residence in the households of their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law upon the consummation of their marriages.

This pattern of residence is common to all the Gê-speaking peoples, of whom the Kayapo are one, and to a number of other Amazonian societies. The Kayapo version of the common pattern is unusual for its extreme emphasis on the displacement of men from their natal households and corresponding stress on their integration into their wives' households as husbands, fathers, and sons-in-law. This promotes the subordination of in-marrying sons-in-law to their wife's parents, which is expressed in prescribed forms of respect, obedience, and deference of the son-in-law to his parents-in-law. The son-in-law undergoes an extended period of probation and self-suppression as he gradually becomes integrated as a "kinsman by marriage," in the Kayapo expression, into his affinal household. This process is replicated in the relations between the age subset of "young fathers" and the senior male age subset of "fathers of many children" within the men's house. Here, too, the young men are collectively subordinated to, and must show deference toward, the senior men. Senior men, by contrast, are free to express themselves in political discussion and debate. They cultivate the art of oratory and play prominent parts in communal ceremonies as sources of knowledge about details of ritual performance. The office of chief or, in Kayapo terms, "the deliverer of specialized ritual chants" (*ben-iadjuoro*), of which there are usually two or more in a village, is normally recruited from their ranks.

This asymmetrical pattern of transformation in male-household relations is both generated and embodied by the Kayapo age-set system and its institutional hub, the men's house, which acts as the focus of the activities of both the men's and women's age-set systems. The men's house is located in the center of the circular village plaza (the word for men's house, *ngà*, means "center"). The plaza and men's house are the setting of the main activities of the age sets, which constitute the ceremonial and political life of the village. The men's house also serves as the dormitory of the youngest age set of boys, who are removed from their maternal houses at about eight years of age and henceforth make the men's house their domicile until they marry. They and their age-mates remain residents of the men's house through their initiation as bachelors and into later adolescence, until they consummate their courtships of girls by getting one pregnant, which the Kayapo regard as the consummation of marriage. The young man's achievement of fatherhood is the essential precondition for his removal from the men's house and his assumption of residence as a father-husband in the house of his wife and wife's parents. This completes the cycle that begins with his removal from his natal household to the men's house under the sponsorship of a figure called a "substitute" or "false father," an unrelated man who assumes the role of paternal sponsor of the boy for purposes



of men's house activities until he is ready to move into his wife's household as a father in his own right.

The formal severance of the relation of fathers to their sons through the institutions of the "false father" and the boy's induction into the men's house starts the process of maturation and social identity development. The definition of marriage as the consummation of fatherhood reinforces of the role of father-husband and initiates the young man's transfer from the bachelors' dormitory of the men's house to the adult status of resident husband and son-in-law in his wife's household. This transition produces the apparently paradoxical effect of a patrilateral bias of the Kayapo kinship and marriage system, which is juxtaposed upon the context of the matriuxorilocal rule of postmarital residence.

This is a relational pattern fraught with structural tension, created and sustained by formal norms of avoidance between young men and their maternal households after their induction into the men's house and then by respect and avoidance behavior enjoined upon young husbands toward their in-laws after they move into their wives' households. Young fathers must show formal deference (which the Kayapo call *pia'äm*) toward their mothers- and fathers-in-law. The new husband, as a son-in-law, spends the first years of his marriage not speaking to his affines unless spoken to, not looking directly at them, and contributing his labor to any household tasks that his affines may call upon him to perform.

*Pia'äm*, incidentally, the term used to denote the correct attitude of respect by a young son-in-law toward his mother- and father-in-law, is the general Kayapo term for "shame," and is also used to describe the typical attitude of fearful reticence shown by the young of wild animals brought back to the village as pets by hunters who have killed their parents.

Like the animal brought in as a pet, the husband gradually grows familiar with his in-laws, and the more exaggerated forms of respectful inhibition become relaxed on both sides. From his initial status as an incoming affine in the household, he increasingly assumes the identity of a resident kinsman, above all because his children are defined as consanguineal kin by his wife's family. By the time his sons have left for the men's house and his daughters have reached marriageable age, the man is ready to take the place of his father-in-law as the senior male head of the household.

This transition is paralleled by his ascension in the men's house within the senior men's age grade (called "fathers") from the subset of "new fathers" (that is, essentially, sons-in-law) to that of "old fathers" or "fathers of many children." The latter is the age set of senior men who take the lead in political discussion oratory and ceremonial performance. The women of the community, too, are organized in a series of age sets like the men's: the sets of girls and maidens, like the male boys and bachelors, engage in collective social activities, the most frequent and important of which are ceremonial singing and dancing. Women of marriageable age are organized in sets that correspond to those of the men's sets, the "new fathers" and "fathers of many children," with which they are formally associated as "wives of the men's house."

The age sets of both genders thus constitute hierarchies of communal groups, the principal activity of which is to celebrate elaborate ceremonies that involve daily dancing and singing. The most important ceremonies last for two to three months

at a time. These are the ceremonies celebrating the bestowal of the honorific names, called “great” (*ruyn*) or “beautiful” (*mêtc'h*) names, on a small number of children whose parents have volunteered to sponsor the ceremony.

The formal severance of the relations of parents of both genders to their offspring by means of the institution of the “substitute parent” may be understood as a preemptive solution to the contradiction that would otherwise arise from the combination of the emphasis on fatherhood and integration into the father–husband’s affinal household and the matriuxorilocal rule of postmarital residence. The emphasis on the father–husband’s attachment to his wife’s household would normally be expected to lead to a strong attachment of father to son, and the son’s strong attachment to his paternal (that is, also, his maternal) household, which would conflict with his future integration into his wife’s household. Adoption by the unrelated man who becomes his “false father” and his induction by this substitute father into the men’s house attenuates these bonds and prevents this problem from arising.

The virtual severance of a boy’s relations to his natal family by this arrangement is counterbalanced by the establishment of close relations with other members of his father’s and mother’s natal families who have been spun off through these same processes. These attenuated kin are the ones who can bestow names and ritual valuables on him. These names and valuables are, in effect, the basic constituents of his social identity; the requirement that these constituents must come in the form of sharing names and valuables with one or more of his grandparents, paternal aunts, and maternal uncles means that his social identity becomes tantamount to his identification with them.

From the perspective of the developmental cycle of the family, the Kayapo pattern of bestowing and receiving names reconnects the end points of the dispersion of a family (its children’s children) with its point of origin (the parents of the children’s parents). These connections reunite grandparents with grandchildren, and aunts and uncles with nephews and nieces, in a supremely social way. We have seen that the Kayapo system of recruitment to age sets and the development of the men’s house, with its conversion of the resident male age sets into corporate associations for collective political and ritual activities, exacerbate the dispersion of elementary families and household attachments. The end result is to reinforce the social and political hegemony of men of the senior age subset of “fathers of many children.” These older men are expected to exemplify, in their public personas and activities, the value of beauty (an expectation also extended to women of the corresponding female age subset).

The severity of the dispersion of family and household attachments, and the powerful emphasis on relations of subordination and dominance in men’s affinal households and the men’s house, give rise to strong social tensions that have frequently erupted in the fission of Kayapo communities. The struggles leading to these secessions and divisions of villages have usually been led by men of the bachelors’ and young fathers’ age sets.

These chronic tensions are countered by the very elaborate and prolonged ceremonies required for the bestowal of names and valuables. The organization and performance of these rituals are the principal activities of the age sets and societies associated with the men’s house. The production of the “beautiful” naming ceremony, in effect, turns the institutional causes of the major fissive tensions of



Kayapo society into the instruments of resolving or transcending the tensions. These names and valuables can only be bestowed by certain people—former or current coresident family members of a husband and wife—and given to the latter's children to create social rather than biological bonds.

“Great” or “beautiful” names belong to a small number of classes designated by prefixes: for male names, *Bep-* as in *Bepkororo-ti*, and *Tàkàk* as in *Tàkàk-’i-re*, and for female names, *Payn-* as in *Payn-’ò*, *Bekwoy-* as in *Bekwòy-ka*, *Nhàk-* as in *Nhàk-pòk*, and *Iré*, as in *Iré-kaprin*. One class of beautiful names beginning with the prefix *Kòkò-*, as in *Kòkò-ba*, is given to both genders.

There are seven such names in all. All can be conferred only in the elaborate, months-long communal ceremonies performed by the age sets: male age sets and men's house associations for male names, female age sets and associations for women's names. The ceremonies are similar in form although variable in symbolic content. The age sets and associations, however, do not own the names. All names belong to individual persons, and they can only be given by persons of specific relationship categories to young children of the reciprocal categories. Male names, for example, must be given by kinsmen belonging to the terminological category that includes maternal and paternal grandfathers and maternal uncles, and the recipients must be their grandsons or sister's sons. Female names are passed between the corresponding categories of female relations.

The great naming ceremonies are the main social instruments for the production of the value of “beauty” as embodied in the massive communal effort represented by their performance and encoded by the “great” or “beautiful” names bestowed in the ceremonies as the principal tokens of the value they embody. They thus constitute a social instrument for the production of beauty as a counter to the major internal social threat posed by the fissive tensions referred to above. The beauty that is produced is two-fold: first, the ritual endows certain members of society with beauty and social prominence; second, it creates a community that works together, embodied in the large, peaceful village that resists fissive pressures—what the Kayapo call, in fact, a “beautiful village,” *krin mètch*.

There is a problem with this elegant solution, however. The massive ceremonies required for the bestowal of “beautiful” names are too costly in terms of the resources and collective effort required for their performance to be held for all children. Many families are too small or socially marginal, or else the parents are disinclined to undertake the effort involved in sponsoring such rituals.

As a partial solution to this problem, certain relations of both genders (as described above), and only they, can also give other names that lack the honorific prefixes of the “beautiful” names. These are called “common” (*kakrit*) names. They do not require ceremonies for bestowal, but may be passed directly by their owners to junior relatives of the appropriate categories. “Common” names are always semantically transparent, generally referring to common objects, qualities, or activities, whereas the prefixes of beautiful names are, for the most part, semantically opaque.

In addition to “beautiful” names, there is also a large and variegated class of “valuables” or rights, called *nêkrètch*, which are also considered “beautiful.” These valuables are passed down between the same categories of relatives as names (both “beautiful” and common). This class consists of ritual privileges, items of personal adornment, rights to certain portions of the carcasses of designated

species of animals, the right to blow whistles made of the bones of certain birds, and so on. Like names, *nêkrêtch* valuables form integral parts of the personal social identities of their owners, and only individual persons (not extended family households, as claimed by Lea 1992) can own and pass on such valuables to others. With a few exceptions, *nêkrêtch* are not linked to names, but are passed down separately, although between the same categories of kin. As in the case of “beautiful” names, not everyone receives *nêkrêtch* from his or her senior inter-family relatives.

Not only are people classed as either beautiful or common, but there is a parallel classification of animals as well. The major game animals, such as tapirs, peccaries, and the large tortoises used for ritual feasts, comprise the class of “beautiful” animals. As S. Hugh-Jones (1996) has pointed out, such large game animals are typically hunted collectively and also tend to be consumed in collective social contexts. Their association with social collectivity may be a major factor in their classification as “beautiful.” The refinement of “beautiful” people is indexed by their dietary preferences for eating the flesh only of “beautiful” animals (this rule, I have observed, is often broken in practice when only “common” game like monkeys, coatis, or capybaras are available). As mentioned earlier, “common” species are indiscriminately devoured by “common” people, who may be unkindly referred to as *mē ngwòy tam bôrô*, or “those who will eat fowl roasted directly on the fire just as they are” (with their feathers still on them).

The Kayapo system of names and ritual valuables results in the division of the whole society into two great status groups. Only about a half of all persons in any village receive “great” or “beautiful” names in ceremonies (the proportion varies, but never approaches one hundred per cent). This is because sponsoring naming ceremonies requires large amounts of labor and the aid of many relatives for the daily supply and preparation of food and other refreshment to the dancers, as well as the support of the father of the name-receiving child, who must lead the hunting of game and tortoises to be slaughtered for the climactic feast. Many families lack the resources and kin connections necessary to undertake the sponsorship of communal naming rituals.

Those who receive only “common” names are called “common” (*kakrit*) people. “Common,” in this context, has the pejorative sense that it sometimes does in British English, connoting vulgarity or lack of cultural refinement, resulting from poorly connected or otherwise undistinguished parentage.

Those who receive a “beautiful” name or names collectively make up the status category of “beautiful” people (*mē mêtch*). Members of this category share two important attributes: their names that define their honorific status must have been given at the end of a major ritual effort on the part of the entire social community; and they must have come from well-off parents and a relatively large kindred to have sponsored and collaborated in the production of the required ceremony. The “beauty” in question thus derives from the size and communal status of the group involved in making possible the bestowal of the tokens of “beautiful” status.

The Kayapo system thus gives rise to the division of the entire society, including men and women alike, into two status groups roughly equal in size: the category of “common” people, for whom communal naming ceremonies are not held and who receive relatively few “valuables” from their grandparents, uncles, and aunts; and



the category of “beautiful” people, who possess names and valuables imbued with the prestigious value of “beauty” (being *mêetch*).

The bisection of Kayapo society by the status distinction between “beautiful” and “common” people does not result in the formation of corporate caste or descent groups. The chiefly office may be filled by a “common” man as well as by a “beautiful” one, and a chief of “common” origin may be counted as, or at least aspire to being considered, one of the “beautiful” elite of the community. As a rule, however, the personal identities of chiefs, like others, are defined by the values attached to their respective social identities. To a certain extent, this value is the product of individual talent and abilities, but much is derived from the investment directed toward the individual, since these values are produced and defined by social activity. The ceremonial action of the whole community is required for the bestowing of beautiful names, while “common” names are simply given by the individual uncles, aunts, or grandparents who hold them.

The social connotation of this distinction is that members of the “beautiful” status group must have come from families well established in the community, with relatively extensive kinship networks and social influence to assist them in the labor and resources necessary to perform one of the great naming ceremonies, while “common” people include the majority of those who lack sufficient kin, friends, and political influence in the community.

As we have seen, the Kayapo system of family, kinship, and marriage relations, like the superstructure of collective age sets, men’s house associations, and ceremonial performances that embody its cyclical transformations, is constructed of tensely balanced juxtapositions of separation and solidarity. It is fraught with dissonant relations that call for relatively strict discipline and self-control on the part of its members. Even the supreme value of “beauty,” as the expression of wholeness and the interconnected coherence of mutually distinct parts, seems precariously balanced against the pressures for centrifugal dispersion of the ordered relations in which it inheres.

There is nevertheless a firm material basis for the social distinction between the value of the “great” names and prerogatives of the “beautiful” people, on the one hand, and those of the “common” people, on the other. It is grounded in the immense amount of time and effort invested by the whole community in the celebration of the ceremonies in which the names were conferred. The resulting distinction and its value is publicly communicated by the names conferred in the rituals and the performance by the “beautiful” ones of their prerogatives mentioned earlier: special ritual roles in ceremonies, the right to blow special bone whistles, the observance of special dietary restrictions, and so forth. Such a division of an entire society into “beautiful” and “common” people does not exist, to my knowledge, in other Gê groups.

The ceremonies that have become the essential instruments for the bestowal of “great” names and valuables on children, thereby investing them with the value of “beauty,” are at the same time the main activity of the age sets. The importance of communal organizations in the ceremonial life counters the tendency to fission along age-set lines.

It is significant that in related Northern Gê societies, such as the Ramkokamekran, Kr’ikati, and Krahô, where men have stronger and more continuous relations

with members of their natal families and households, names are not divided into “beautiful” and “common” status classes. Instead, names are grouped into fixed clusters that are passed down together between senior and junior relatives without ceremony, like Kayapo common names. Certain names within these groups, however, carry the obligation for the recipient and his or her family to sponsor a ceremony attached to that name. The system is the reverse of the Kayapo pattern: the person who receives the name is required to sponsor the communal ceremony, rather than the ceremony being required to bestow the name, as among the Kayapo.

### Bodiliness, humanity, and animality as transformational processes: Kayapo animism?

Kayapo ideas about bodilyness are founded on the principle that all beings are in active processes of development, transformation, and interaction, which not only produce their own forms but also affect the forms and transformations of other bodies and entities. It follows that no embodied form can be understood solely as the product of its own activity, but always owes its formation in part to its relations with other bodies.

Bodies develop dialectically as internal content meets external relations. These forms develop as the channels of the material energies arising from bodies orient their development and activities, and are in turn shaped by the external relations of the body to other bodies. The forms of things, in other words, are actually embodied processes of formation, which also serve to orient future development and activities. They consist of the directed agency or force that impels the material content of things, including their energetic forces, to assume the specific patterns proper to the species of body or kind of entity in question. This proposition, as we shall see, holds for the cosmos as a whole and all its parts or constituent units.

This set of ideas is exemplified by the cluster of meanings associated with the Kayapo term *karon*, which is used equally to mean “image,” “form,” “shadow,” and the “spirit,” “soul,” or “ghost” of a person or other entity. Although humans are thought of as the *karon*-possessing beings *par excellence*, mammals, birds, fish, and many trees, vines, and other plants, and even some entities like the sun and moon that might be defined as inanimate, are also thought to possess spirit forms and associated subjective powers.

Here we rejoin the basic notion behind the “animism” common to most, if not all, indigenous peoples of the Amazon (Bird-David 1999; Descola 1996, 2005; Turner 2009). Kayapo animism is grounded in the idea that animals and other natural beings, animate and, in some cases, inanimate, possess spirit forms similar in character to those of humans, although different in specific functions and powers. These spirit forms consist of schemas of transformational processes that are oriented toward basic purposes like growth, reproduction, self-defense, and subsistence. Animism, as a general idea of the mental or spiritual life of animals and perhaps other beings, is based on the extension of the assumption that this spiritual property of form is shared to some extent by all animate (and some inanimate) beings. The energies and powers inherent in these processes comprise a generic notion of power possessed in varying measure by all beings, a sort of generalized demiurgic



force. This is analogous, in some respects, to Maret's recension of Codrington's *mana*, but differs from it in that the Kayapo concept is oriented toward the life process of the creatures, plants, or other beings that employ it.

The life of an animate being, in this view, is the product of the union of the form (or spirit) and content (or bodily substance), which together constitute the body of the being in question. The spirit of the entity is its form transformed into a pattern of activity. The spirit requires the substance and energy of the material entity, its physical body, to exist and develop. Reciprocally, the material aspect of the entity, its substance and activity, depends on its spirit form to guide and orient its formation and relations with other entities.

This synthetic unity of form and content comprises the life process of the body, which has both subjective and objective aspects. It is not a fixed property, but a quantitatively variable, unstable, dynamic relation that is susceptible to disruption and eventual dissolution. Such dissolution can be partial and temporary, as in illness, shock-induced by extreme fright, or *aybanh* trances, or it can be permanent, as in the death of the person or being. Death is the permanent separation of spirit form from body substance, the dissolution of the synthetic unity of spirit and body that was the basis of the life process of the entity.

### Bodily form as spirit and agent: Embodiment as power

The objective forms of bodies, including the natural or, in the case of humans, socially modified configurations of their skin, hair, and other features, are not merely inert forms or semiotic categories but schemas of activity. Schemas are patterns of intentional or goal-directed activities, including physical growth and, for humans, social relations as well, such as marriage and recruitment to social groups (Turner 1994).

For the Kayapo, in sum, bodiliness includes not only the physical and cultural aspects of the body, but also extends beyond the body as a singular object to its relations with other bodies. It further includes processes of formation and disintegration, objectification and deobjectification, and the construction of subjectivity and of intersubjective relations. In all these respects, bodiliness is an active principle that consists essentially of activities and transformations rather than practico-inert categories or classifications. These active processes of bodiliness, as I have suggested above, comprise not only the life but also the death of bodies, embodied beings, and persons. In these dynamic aspects of bodiliness, form and content behave, not merely as descriptive categories, but as material forces of embodiment and disembodiment.

Bodiliness, in sum, comprises the tensions and mutual catalysis of these forces as together they constitute the embodied being. The forces, however, eventually weaken and are unable permanently to sustain the synthetic unity they produce, which ultimately disintegrates. What begins as a process of objectification of the person thus leads to its deobjectification as the unity of spirit and flesh disintegrates. This inexorable linear destiny, however, may be transcended by the ultimate power of embodiment: reproduction. In this context, reproduction as a total social fact refers, not merely to biological renewal, but to the replication of the form of the

life cycle in all its natural and social features: the emergence of form from content, the integration of spirit and body, the replication of their transient unity in individual and social life, and their final separation.

## Death and mortuary poetics

For the Kayapo, neither spirit nor physical body can exist independently for long without the other. The separation of spirit and body therefore results in the decomposition and disappearance of each separated part. The *karon*, or spirit form, continues to exist as a ghost for a time after the death of the body, but gradually loses its human character, becoming an animal-like being in the forest and eventually dissolving completely (in keening for the dead, the spirit of the deceased is said to have “become an animal”). The material content of the body (~*in*, flesh; ‘*i*, bones; and *kamrô*, blood) undergoes a parallel process of dissolution, losing the articulation of its parts as they become separately transformed by decomposition. The formation and development of living bodies and persons, a process of objectification of their material and social identities, is thus ultimately balanced by a complementary process of deobjectification.

This process of deobjectification is itself embodied by Kayapo mortuary practices, above all, by burial and the construction of the grave. After death, the corpse is painted and decorated, then carried to the burying ground outside the village. A circular hole is dug, large enough to accommodate the corpse in a flexed position. After the body is placed in the grave, the hole is roofed with logs, which, in turn, are covered by mats and the dirt excavated from the grave pit, forming a conical tumulus on top of the mats. The deceased’s possessions are broken and either thrown in the grave with the corpse or left on the tumulus. No living person can keep or use any of the deceased’s possessions, which would serve as “paths” that the spirit could follow back to living users to kill them so that they could join the spirit and keep it company in the haunts of the ghosts out in the forest. After a finite period of time, the ghost itself evaporates into nothing. The grave and tumulus keep pace with this dissolution. The mats placed over the log roof of the grave rot, and the earth from the tumulus filters through into the grave pit. Eventually, the grave is filled and the tumulus disappears; the grave is left level with the ground and disappears.

The grave tumulus starts its existence as the embodiment and sign of death: not of death as a static condition, but as a transformational process in reverse—not constructive, but destructive. The corpse in the grave is a content losing its form, and the grave tumulus is a form losing its content: they finally come together in a new unity of mutual disintegration of form and content—the death of death, as it were. In thus framing death as the disintegration of human form and content, however, the concrete poetics of the construction and demise of the tumulus manage to exemplify the uniquely human power that distinguishes humanity from animals and other beings. Kayapo think that a number of other beings—some animals, some birds, some fish—act socially, according to shared programs or recipes for transformative behavior. Some have ceremonies in which they give themselves names; some have families in which they reproduce and raise their young; some follow regular underwater fish paths along river bottoms to different kinds of places for



spawning, resting, feeding, and holding ceremonies. In these respects, they are like humans, who also organize their behavior according to shared schemas of similar types of transformative activity. Only humans, however, apply transformative schemas to their own first-order schemas. They use fire to make fire; they employ the schemas of individual ceremonial processes to reintegrate relatives separated by the dispersion of old families and formation of new ones; and they construct the grave tumulus and allow it to disintegrate as an embodiment of the disintegration of a dead human body. Animals, birds, fish, trees, and even the sun and moon do not do such things; as the Kayapo see it, only humans do.

### Conclusion: Humans, animals, and cultural knowledge

There is a long tradition in social anthropology of debate over the question of whether a cultural conception of the world is a projection of the structure of the members' own social system, or whether, on the contrary, their knowledge of the external, nonhuman world is taken as the model of their conception of their human society and themselves. The latest manifestation of this issue has been the revival of interest in animism and the development of what has been called "perspectivism," primarily in France and Brazil. According to some contemporary anthropologists, notably Descola (1994, 1996, 2005), animism is a form of knowledge or a set of ideas about the world based on projecting conceptions of human social relations or cultural traits onto animals and their supposed consciousness of themselves. "Perspectivism," an approach led by Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2002, 2004), has contributed the idea that members of indigenous Amazonian cultures think that animals see themselves as humans under the skin, as it were, and, that each species, from its own perspective, considers all other species, including humans, to be natural beings. The essential idea appears to be that the distinction between animals and humans, culture and nature, so fundamental to Western civilization since Descartes or perhaps Aristotle, is, from the indigenous Amazonian perspective, fundamentally misguided. Rather, animals, as the leading exemplars of what have been viewed from the Western cultural perspective as the natural world, actually identify themselves as human, cultural beings.

I have elsewhere (Turner 2009) given reasons for considering these ideas to be based on erroneous interpretations of ethnographic evidence, as well as of Western philosophical and anthropological theories. Here I want to return to the question of the nature of indigenous Amazonian perspectives on the world, specifically the relation of humans to animals and other "natural" entities, on the basis of the Kayapo data I have discussed in this paper. I have suggested that the Kayapo do have a kind of animism, which identifies common features of human subjective identity and bodiliness, and those of animal and other "natural" beings. Nevertheless, this commonality constitutes only a partial overlap, as in a Venn diagram, between humanity and nonhuman beings, and the overlap is different for each species of animals and other natural entities. Partial overlap does not mean identity: on the contrary, I have argued that the Kayapo have developed quite a sophisticated notion of the essential differences between themselves, as humans, and animals. In other words, they have a complex, reflexive idea about the nature of specifically

human consciousness, social practices, and perspective on the world. I have tried to define the essence of this conception in this presentation.

By way of summary, I wish to emphasize the particular features and power of the contents of the overlapping area in the Venn diagram, which comprises the Kayapo conception of the universal features of consciousness and existence shared by all beings; the fundamental role of transformational processes as the principal constituents of species and cultural consciousness; and the centrality of the dialectical interplay of form (as an active agency or spirit) and content (as substance, energy, strength, and sensory capacity). That these generic features are shared by all beings does not imply that they originally developed in one species (such as humanity) and were projected onto others, in what Marxists might describe as an alienated or fetishized mistaking of human subjective perspectives for natural features. Rather, they serve as a set of general ideas—or, perhaps better in this context, what Maret described as “pre-animist” dispositions—which serve the Kayapo as the counterpart of a general scientific theory of the nature of the world.

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